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 Xtreme



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## **Chapter 6**

# ***A Leaf in a Tornado***

***I fell hard into the water.*** It was shockingly warm. I started to say so to Amy when a wave hit me.

The wave ripped me away from Amy. I was like a leaf in a tornado, rushing out of control. The water swirled around me, over me, dragging me . . . and then, suddenly, I felt a yank on my safety harness. I stopped short. The line held.

Amy had managed to grab hold of the rope to the raft. She was halfway between the raft and the *Sparta*, clinging to it, screaming. The waves kept crashing over her. At least I knew that the safety line would hold, if she lost her grip.

I pulled myself along my safety line, hand over

hand, back to the main rope. My life jacket kept me afloat, but it didn't keep the waves from trying to knock me down. They surged against my face, filling my mouth and nose. I coughed and spat as I inched along the line.

Finally I reached Amy. "Got you," I said, putting my hands over hers on the rope. She kicked frantically underwater. Her foot caught me in the knee. "Amy! Stop it. You have to – " a wave broke over us. I clung to Amy. She kept fighting me. "Calm down!"

"Dad," she said, looking back at the *Sparta*.

Neither of us could see him. All we could see was the *Sparta*, waves crashing over it. The boat was much lower in the back than in the front. It reminded me of that *Titanic* movie, where the ship stands almost straight up before taking her final dive.

I swallowed. Now was not the time to think about the *Titanic*.

"He's coming," I said. "We have to – " another wave. " – Get to the raft."

Cory was already climbing into the raft. He hauled himself over the edge and fell inside. Now he was safe and we were still in the water.

I could only grit my teeth.

Amy clung to my back like a little kid. We swam together, slowly, holding onto the rope that led to the raft. I learned to push down and kick when the waves hit. "Good," I told Amy. "Almost there." Saying it made me feel better.

When we reached the life raft, I was panting. My life jacket and harness made a tight band around my ribs. I wanted to rip them off so I could breathe. But not now. They'd kept us alive so far and might have to do it again.

The life raft was rubbery on the bottom, nylon on top. It was slick with water, too slick to climb up. But a sort of rope ladder made of webbing hung down one side.

"Can you climb?" I asked Amy.

She nodded. I helped Amy to get her foot onto the ladder, but her legs shook so hard she couldn't push herself up.

"Cory!" I shouted. "Help! Pull her up!"

He cowered on the far side of the raft. Was he afraid we'd tip it?

A wave knocked Amy off the ladder. I grabbed her life jacket and pulled her back. "Come on," I said. We stuck our feet in the bottom loop of the ladder together.

I helped her climb, staying just behind and below her.

There were only three rungs, but they sank when we stepped on them. It was hard to climb and fight the waves at the same time. One rung. Up. Another rung. Push. Another. . . .

Finally, Amy got her rib cage over the top of the raft. She kicked and rolled her way into the lifeboat. Her heel banged my jaw.

Spots blinked in front of my eyes. I pressed my hand to my jaw and clung to the raft.

"Tanner!" Amy called from above me. At least she was safe. She grabbed at my life jacket and tugged. She was trying to pull me up, but I was too heavy.

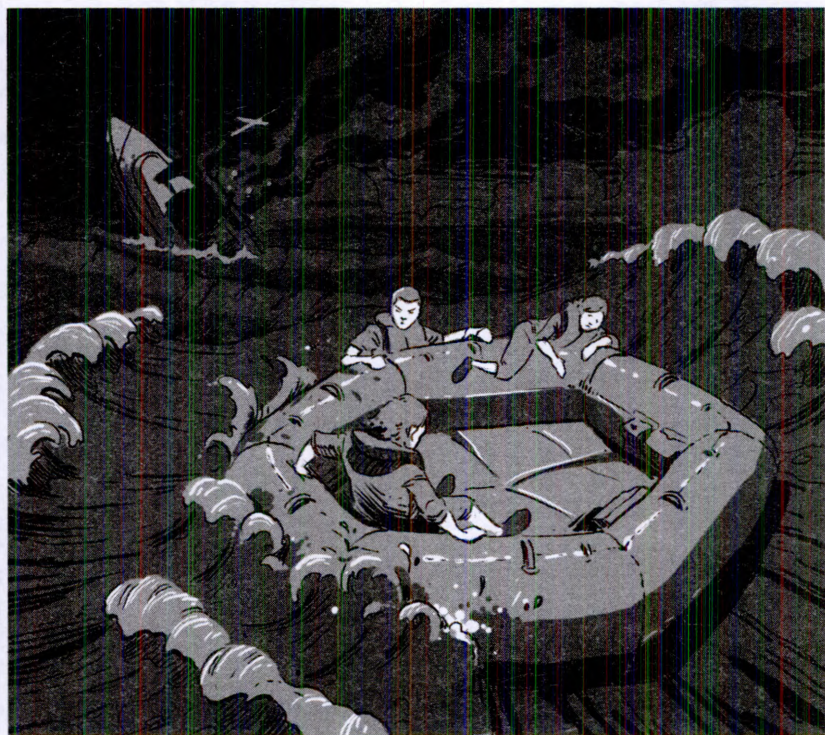
"Wait," I said. "Give me a minute." I took a breath. Then I hauled myself onto the last rung.

When I reached the top, Amy was there, yanking at my life jacket until I tumbled into the raft.

I lay there, stunned. The three of us were safe, at least for now. The three of us had escaped the sinking boat. But what about Dad? I struggled to my knees and looked for him.

The *Sparta's* front end was barely above water now. Smoke still poured from the cabin. I didn't see Dad or the Skipper.





“We have to get to them,” I shouted. I started pulling on the rope that attached us to the *Sparta*. Hand over hand, fighting the waves, I tried to pull us back there.

When I felt Cory’s shoulder against mine, I thought he was going to help. I let him grab the rope. That was my mistake.

Cory unclipped it from the raft. My white-knuckled grip on the rope was the only thing holding us to the *Sparta*.

"What are you doing?" I shouted.

"That boat's sinking!" he yelled. "It'll pull us down, too!"

"My Dad is on that boat!" I started to pull again, hand over hand.

Amy tackled Cory, scratching him and pulling his hair. He batted at her.

Meanwhile, I was being pulled out of the life raft. The top of it was wet and slippery, and the tug of the waves against the *Sparta's* rope was too much. From the waist up, I hung out over the water. I hooked my foot through a strap to try and hold on to both the raft and the rope. But I was being pulled into two pieces.

"Tanner, you can't!" Amy yelled. She grabbed my legs and tugged me back. It took a split second, no more. I lost my grip. The rope was gone. The *Sparta* plunged into the storm.

## Chapter 7

# ***The Sparta is Lost***

***I stared into the storm.*** With each gust of wind, we pulled away from the sinking *Sparta*. With each wave, she grew smaller.

“Dad!” I screamed, cupping my hands around my mouth. The wind carried my voice away.

I didn’t realize I was standing until Amy tugged at my wrist. “Get down!”

But I didn’t. I couldn’t. Two tiny figures appeared on the deck of the *Sparta*. I couldn’t see what they were doing. One of them pointed our way. I waved my arms back and forth. How could we get back there?

Then I had an idea. “There have to be paddles in this thing!” I shouted. “Get me the paddles.”



Amy held up an aluminum paddle. It was no bigger than the plastic ones on a child's blow-up boat. I stared at it. "The other's broken," she said.

I grabbed the good paddle from her. I knelt at the side of the raft, leaned over, and started paddling.

It was worse than useless. The waves pushed us where they wanted. And the waves didn't want us back with the *Sparta*.

I screamed and threw the tiny paddle out to sea. Then I panicked and tried to reach it.

"Moron!" Cory grabbed me by the shoulders and pulled me back to the center of the raft. "What did you do that for?"

"My Dad's on that boat," I said. I felt like someone had punched a hole in me and let all the air out. My voice was small and my eyes burned.

"And there's nothing we can do about it," Cory said.

I shook him off and knelt in the middle of the raft. The *Sparta* was a speck now, a small speck on a big ocean. I stared and stared. As long as I kept her in sight, Dad and I were connected.

But I was too weak. I blinked.

The *Sparta* disappeared.

## **Chapter 8**

### ***Two Packets of Water***

***I knelt there for a*** long time. I kept staring at the spot on the waves where the *Sparta* had disappeared. Now there was nothing. Nothing.

Slowly, I noticed things again. The rubber smell of the raft. Salt drying, itchy, on my skin. The springy feel of the inflated floor beneath my knees. Amy and Cory were moving around, opening things, talking in low voices.

The storm had passed. The wind had died down, and the sun was bright again. The sea was smooth, like rippled glass. It was as if everything was fine. As if we were out here for fun.

Unreal.

"Tanner?" It was Amy. She had her glasses on again.

I turned. She and Cory had taken off their life jackets and safety harnesses. Amy wore Dad's windbreaker tied around her waist. I swallowed.

"Here." Amy held out a soda cracker. "You should eat something. And take off your life jacket. The storm's over."

I took the cracker.

Cory stared at me. Amy was watching me, too. So I swallowed the last bit of the cracker. It was dry and salty and the last thing I wanted.

"There isn't much on this boat, but we have a few supplies," Amy said.

"What – what supplies?" I asked. It was the first thing I'd said that wasn't a scream. The words came out rusty and broken.

Amy brightened. "Here," she said. She showed me two pouches that had been attached to the inside of the life raft. One read First Aid; the other, Rations. There was also a metal box labeled Supplies. Inside it, we found just a few things. There was a waterproof flashlight with weak batteries. Packed beside it were a compass, a whistle, and some coiled-up fishing line.

Then there was a small mirror. Who put a mirror in a safety kit?

I held it up. "In case we need to fix our hair?"

"For signaling," Amy said. She took the mirror from me and flashed a beam of sunlight into my eyes.

I blocked the light with my arm. "Put that thing away."

When my eyes stopped watering, she showed me the rest of the stuff. The rations pouch held about a dozen packages of soda crackers, mostly crumbled. There were two granola bars with ancient wrappers. And some pills. Vitamin C, the label read.

"Water?" I asked.

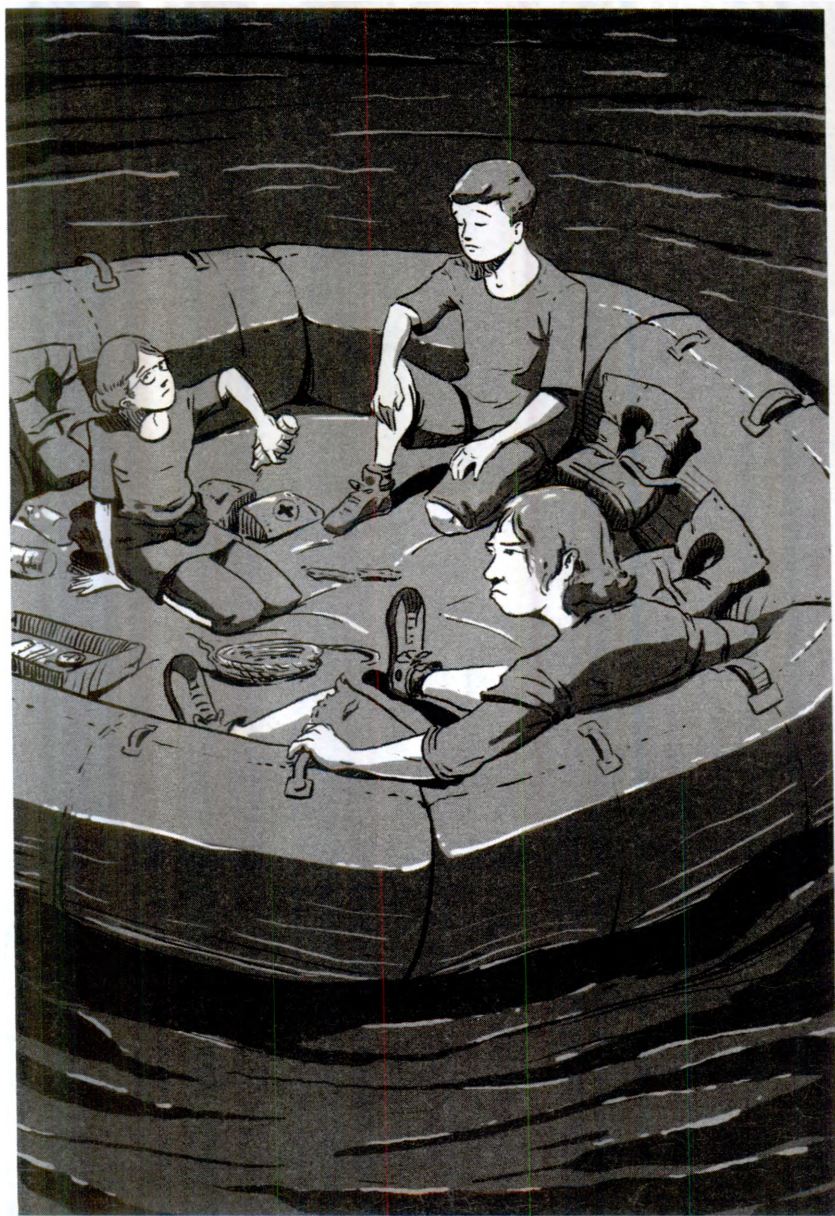
Amy's face fell. "A little," she told me. "There were three packets. Two good ones. One of them must have burst when it was still inside the suitcase." She held up an empty, clear plastic tube. It was about the size of a small carton of milk. So we had maybe a litre of water. For all three of us.

Cory cleared his throat.

I didn't wait for him to make an excuse. "I don't want to hear anything you have to say. Got it?"

"Tanner . . ." Amy started.

"No," I said. "Cory unclipped the rope. He's the reason Dad . . ."



I couldn't say it.

Amy squeezed her eyes shut. Her shoulders shook, and her face turned red. She curled her hands into tight fists and crossed her arms in front of her face.

I touched her shoulder, but she jerked away.

"Don't," she said.

"Amy. . . ."

She shook her head, blinking back tears.

I looked at the endless ocean. At our tiny, ruined paddle, crumbling around the edge. At the empty sky above. We had nothing but time.

"If you need to cry, you cry," I finally told her. It's what Dad would have said. Then I hugged her, and she rested her head on my shoulder.

After a few seconds, she sat up and sniffed. "No," she said. "He might still be okay."

I had no answer for that. "Let's go through the first aid pouch," I said. It would take our thoughts off . . . other things.

"Cory and I already did," she said. "He helped me fix my leg."

That got my attention. "What's wrong with your leg?"

She pulled up her shorts just a little to show a white



bandage wrapped around her thigh. "I gashed it on something getting off the boat," she said. "It's not that bad. Just a big cut." She held her fingers about three inches apart.

Not bad as long as it didn't get infected. I whipped around to face Cory. "Did you clean it?"

"With what?" He held his hands wide apart. "There's almost nothing in that kit. Aspirin and a little foil blanket and some Band-aids. It's useless. What kind of a life raft is this, anyhow?" He threw the words at me like it was my fault.

"Oh, I don't know." I crossed my arms. "The kind that saved our lives?"

Cory leaned forward, jabbing his finger into my face. "Back off, Mr. Perfect. Amy and I checked out the raft while you sat there like a lump. And I fixed your sister's leg, as best I could. What else do you want?"

What did I want? I wanted Dad back, but the words dried up on my tongue. Cory had bandaged Amy's leg, and I hadn't even seen it. I'd let myself get lost in my own world. But Amy was my sister, not his. She was my responsibility. *Look after her*, that was what Dad had said.

"Sorry," I replied. The word tasted like chalk. I

looked down at my feet. "Now what?" I asked. Maybe it was okay to admit that I didn't know what to do next. Maybe Cory or Amy would have an idea.

"Now we wait," Cory said, leaning into a corner of the raft. Amy had already curled up against one of the sides. It looked like she was trying to sleep. She had a life jacket for a pillow.

I stared into the empty sky again and shielded my eyes against the sun.

It might be a long wait.